**Pentecost A:** Numbers 11: 24-30; Acts 2: 1-21; John 20: 19-23

**Alleluia, alleluia, come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful people, and kindle in them the fire of your love. Alleluia.**

**Hear the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John**

When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, ‘Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you.’ When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.’

**This is the Gospel of the Lord - praise to you O Christ**

**May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen**

Pentecost: the clue is in the Pente. We are now fifty days beyond Easter; fifty days beyond the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

And we are celebrating today the birth of the Church. This event, this coming of the Holy Spirit which was visited on the disciples, marks the beginning of a community of people, made in God’s image, gathering in the name of Jesus, for the purposes of spreading the gospel and building up and supporting each other in the faith.

But what do we mean by ‘Holy Spirit’? and how do we understand it?

There was a time, a long time ago, when shops not only observed the Sabbath by remaining closed on Sundays, but also closed for half a day’s rest sometime during the week. A bishop somewhere near here tells the story – a very old story from those times – of another bishop, who was leading a retreat for ordinands – people about to be ordained – who, in preparation for this momentous event were secluded in the retreat house, praying, reflecting and generally getting ready to become very public Christians.

And this bishop, out on the High Street one afternoon, bumped into one of these ordinands and asked, in tones of some surprise, what this young man was doing. Well, Bishop, said the young man – for they were of course all young men back then – the Holy Spirit sent me out to go shopping. Well that is most strange, said the Bishop, that the Holy Spirit and you should both be wrong – because it is half day closing …

And that is a long and apocryphal tale which just illustrates how we humans can sometimes manipulate the invisible spirit of God for our own ends – and why we should be very careful not to. …

Because, just because the Spirit is invisible doesn’t in any way make it unreal or in any way manipulable. To use a hackneyed analogy, the Holy Spirit is like the wind: we cannot see **it**, but we can see its effects. And in Christian terms, the effect of the Spirit on us is about who Jesus is to us; about Jesus’ words and his teachings; and it enables us to act on those words and teachings. Where we see Christ’s love in action, we can be fairly sure that the Spirit is at work.

There is another image which I have found helpful in the past too: I know there are very few around at the present, but we all know what an aeroplane looks like. Have we thought, though, about how it got up there into the sky? And I don’t mean jet fuel or the laws of physics, although they obviously play a part.

It got up there because it was once an idea in someone’s head. The material, mechanical manifestation came later. The invisible gave rise to the visible. We eventually see the physical effect of that which is invisible. We see the fruits of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, all those things and we see the gifts of the Spirit: teaching and healing and those things. But we don’t see the Spirit itself.

So Pentecost, then, when the first believers received the gift of the Holy Spirit and began the mission of being Christ’s witnesses ‘in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth’.

Having been told by Jesus to wait in Jerusalem, they are gathered together in one house, devoting themselves to prayer, waiting for the promise to be fulfilled.

The future is uncertain: Jesus is no longer with them in the flesh, but they wait and hope and trust. We can relate to that. We, too, have spent the last couple of months waiting, each in one house, in uncertainty.

I suspect though that their waiting came to an end in rather more dramatic and conclusive fashion than ours will. Suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house. A tongue of fire rested on each of them. They were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages.

Fire and wind are powerful symbols; fire and wind have the potential both for creation and for destruction.

The *ruach* (Hebrew for Spirit/wind/breath) of God hovers over the face of the primordial waters and God calls forth life (Genesis 1). God calls Moses through a bush that burns but is not consumed (Exodus), and leads the Israelites with a pillar of fire. The Spirit sustains all living creatures, renewing the face of the earth (Psalm 104). The Holy Spirit inspires prophets, both men and women, to see visions and to dream dreams (that bit of Joel that we heard quoted by Peter in the Acts reading this morning).

But fire and wind can also be immensely destructive: we have only to think of bush fires around the world or typhoons and hurricanes. But that destruction inevitably enables new life and new growth. We have been seeing some evidence of new life and new growth during the course of this pandemic: if we burn or blow away our reliance on all the things we used to entertain ourselves with, we return to the simpler pleasures of family life – quizzes and board games and jigsaws and making things; if we blow away the need for travel to and from work, we hear the birdsong and breathe fresher air.

But there is still so much work to be done: economic inequalities remain, and inequalities related to race; we have realised how much we rely on low-paid workers: health care workers, cleaners, supermarket staff – but now we need to recognise them for what they do and for the sacrifices they have made – and by more than just saying thank you.

The work of the Spirit, now as it was back then, is in drawing believers into community. The Spirit of God brought unity at Pentecost: that was the effect created by all those people hearing in their own languages – communication brings us together.

And one theme that we are noticing at present is that there is a deepening and enriching of community – not just among those of us who have continued to worship together, but in the wider sense too. It is easy to be seduced by the Facebook statistics of online services – though I can’t begin to interpret them in any depth. What I know is that people – lots of people – are clicking on services throughout the week – and they may be staying only a moment or two. But that is a moment or two longer than they would have done, had we been in the church building. And more people than usual are clicking in and staying for the duration – and those people are not necessarily the elderly and solitary. They are people from our neighbourhood, who are wanting to see what is going on; they are the people who stood and watched the Holy Spirit descending on the apostles and suddenly heard words and ideas that they recognised and welcomed.

What visions and dreams is the Holy Spirit giving to our community? How can we be witnesses to the person and work of Jesus Christ in our particular place and time?

As we heard this morning, the church has been here before, waiting and hoping, praying and trusting. And we are not – and never - alone. That same Holy Spirit who showed up in fire and wind to the first disciples calls us, too, to be witnesses to Jesus in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria; in Brentwood and Yorkshire, Germany and Cornwall and to the ends of the earth.

I leave you with a snippet from the Old Testament reading this morning, where the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to Moses, and took some of the spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders; and when the spirit rested upon them, they prophesied. But they did not do so again.

Proof, if proof were needed, that we have to continue to pray for the gift and guidance of the Holy Spirit day by day, and then that same Holy Spirit who blessed the first disciples with the gift of tongues, and is alive and active today, will give us what we need.

**Amen**